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ABSTRACT

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Social Responsibilities Discussion Group was officially established in December 1997 to address the role of libraries in society. The group is initially concentrating on the following themes: equality of access to library collections and facilities; the growing gap between library rich and poor both within and between countries; and the "right to know." This policy paper was developed from six discussion papers prepared for the 1998 IFLA meeting. The themes of the discussion papers were: (1) rural library development; (2) literacy in libraries; (3) fees for library services; (4) human resource development; (5) the electronic information gap; and (6) north-south library cooperation. Comments on the profession, library associations, and IFLA structure are also included. (Contains 45 references.) (MES)

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The Growing Gap between the Information Rich and the Information Poor, Both Within Countries and Between Countries - A Composite Policy Paper

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Paper

Introduction

The IFLA Social Responsibilities Discussion Group was officially established in December 1997 to address the role of libraries in society. It is currently affiliated with the IFLA Education and Training Section. The group is initially concentrating on the following themes:

- Equality of access to library collections and facilities,
- The growing gap between library rich and poor both within and between countries,
- The "right to know."

This policy paper was developed from the six discussion papers prepared for the 1998 IFLA meeting in Amsterdam and the comments received at our first open meeting. Much of the following text is taken directly from the papers (see http://www.ifla.org/VII/dg/srdg/index.htm#8). The themes of the discussion papers were: rural library development (Kalpana Dasgupta, India), literacy in libraries (Josephine Andersen, South Africa), fees for library services (Kristine Abelsnes, Norway), human resource development (Dennis Ocholla, South Africa), the electronic information gap (Alfred Kagan, US), and North-South library cooperation (Ismail Abdullahi, US). Each theme will be addressed in turn, including concrete proposals for action.

The information rich and poor are often defined in two separate and distinct ways: The North vs. the South (rich vs. poor countries) and the gap between the elite and the disadvantaged within countries. Our project seeks to unite these ideas. To a greater or larger extent all

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countries have information gaps. The United States and South Africa are examples of two countries that have extremely skewed distribution of wealth, resulting in excellent information services for some and poor or non-existent services for others. Although the United States is rich, its distribution of wealth and information is becoming more unequal. On the other hand, the great majority of South Africans are poor, but there are now efforts to equalize the standard of living that was constructed under apartheid. We believe that libraries, library associations, and those who work in libraries have a social responsibility to address these issues in whatever context they find themselves and in all countries. We hope that the IFLA Professional Board will endorse the following recommendations and provide administrative and monetary support for implementation.

Dennis Ocholla defines the information poor in five ways: 1. The economically disadvantaged populations of the developing countries (The South); 2. Rural people who are often geographically isolated by lack of communication and transportation systems; 3. Those disadvantaged by cultural and social poverty, especially the illiterate, the elderly, women, and children; 4. Minorities who are discriminated against by race, creed and religion; and 5. The physically disabled. The following remarks are focused on addressing the needs of these population groups.

Rural Library Development (Dasgupta)

The most extreme information gaps are between illiterate and neo-literate people in rural villages and rich urban populations. Kalpana Dasgupta reminds us that information is a prerequisite for all development activities. The goals must be to see that the right information reaches the right clientele in the most comprehensible format at the right time. For example in India, rural libraries have helped educate people in local history, village traditions, methods of cultivation, public health, and the message of the freedom movement against British colonialism. The diversity of the rural population must be analyzed in order to plan appropriate library services. Interpersonal forms of communication such as information exchange in marketplaces, water sources, and places of worship must be discovered.

It is necessary to find out how rural communities use information as an aid to the adoption of important innovations and new practices that are crucial with the development process. Before establishing libraries the following information should be developed: village environment (geography, livelihood, education, etc.), peoples' needs (physical, intellectual and psychological), availability of resources, infrastructure facilities, and attitudes of the people. It is important to pay special attention to women, students, young adults, children, and neo-literates. Rural libraries can act as information and community centers to improve living conditions and the quality of life. Local authorities must be empowered to create such institutions.

Recommendation. IFLA should develop a research program on rural library development in coordination with national library agencies. The focus should be on empowerment of local authorities to process appropriate information in comprehensible formats for diverse rural populations.

Literacy in Libraries (Andersen)

Another way to look at the growing information gap is to explore the extremes between illiterate and highly educated people. Josephine Andersen explains that illiteracy often results in unemployment and unemployability. She notes that 36% of the citizen's of her country, South Africa, are illiterate. The problem is historical, and she quotes former Prime Minister Verwoerd (1958-1966) who said "There is no place for the Bantu in the European community above the levels of certain forms of labour." In fact, the acquisition of literacy and education has often been seen as a threat to those in power. This was just as true in the United States during slavery days as in apartheid South Africa.

Illiterate people often do not have access to an environment conducive for learning. Public libraries are ideal learning places and can provide the right surroundings and conditions conductive for human development, even in rural areas without electricity. Libraries must be involved in their communities, and literacy is a library responsibility. Public libraries must promote lifelong learning but often are not equipped to do so and lack librarians with appropriate skills. Literacy programs can be based on Paulo Freire's revolutionary Language Experience Method. Freire advocates problem solving and dialogue between teachers and new learners to encourage critical thinking and creativity. This method contrasts with the "banking method" where teachers "deposit" information in the learners.

Recommendations. IFLA should urge library and information schools to promote adult basic education skills as a component of their curriculums. IFLA should promote literacy training as a basic library service.

Fees for Library Services (Abelsnes)

Kristine Abelsnes quotes the Unesco Public Library Manifesto: "The public library shall in principle be free of charge." The public library must be supported by specific legislation and financed by national and local governments. Libraries are an essential component of any long-term strategy for culture, information provision, literacy and education. Library service is a common good, and free access to information is the backbone of a free and democratic society. Publicly funded libraries are most of all political instruments; they are not businesses.

However, there is a conflict between ideals and economic realities. The dilemma is that library fees can exclude some users, but not charging fees may exclude some special services that in turn may create revenue for basic services. We strive for equal access but even small fees discriminate between users, decreasing library use especially among children and young people. We see a trend in rich countries to protect so-called basic services and charge for supplemental services. However there is no consensus as to what services are basic and what services are special. What is expensive today may be cheap tomorrow, and what seems extra today may be considered basic in the near future. Furthermore once a library charges for one thing, it is easier to decide to charge for something else. Some argue that fee based services generate revenue to subsidize basic services. However experience has often proven the reverse. When supplemental services do not fully recover costs, they result in the poor subsidizing the rich.

Information is not free, but libraries can make it freely available to the community. Information is more than a commodity; wide access to information can empower citizens and therefore be a method of wealth distribution. Commercial information providers have a social responsibility to their communities and public libraries. If we abandon free-of-charge public libraries, we can expect political support for our libraries to erode and even fade away. This could lead to libraries being eventually integrated into the market. This would effectively end any hope of equality of access and cede information access entirely to the commercial sector.

Recommendations. IFLA should take a strong position against fees for basic services broadly construed. IFLA should be an advocate for public libraries in their negotiations with commercial information providers, and promote a price structure based on ability to pay.

Human Resource Development (Ocholla)

Dennis Ocholla discusses library and information education in Africa and the Third World generally. He compares LIS education to the political realm, quoting Ali Mazrui's insight that Africa has borrowed the wrong things from the West: the profit motive without entrepreneurial spirit and the acquisitive appetites of capitalism without creative risk-taking. Similarly, LIS departments are thrilled with modern information systems but apathetic to their development

and maintenance. Instead of lavishly spending money on Western goods and services, it is necessary to address the plight of the information poor.

LIS departments are generally found in universities, and university graduates often dread working with the poor, the illiterate, and in rural areas. These graduates are alienated from the majority of the population who see universities as ivory towers. We must provide students with the knowledge that inculcates a service culture. Libraries can help empower the information poor in tackling their challenges and responsibilities. Graduates must understand their role in transforming the information poor into information consumers, especially because the information poor are often fragile users who are easily discouraged by elitist information providers.

Such a reorientation begins with the selection of dedicated LIS students. Once enrolled, fieldwork is an excellent device for sensitizing students to work ethics and providing a sense of belonging and responsibility. Academic performance is necessary but not sufficient for advising students on various specializations. Such decisions must also take service attitude into consideration. Continuing education and informal education is a life-long process. LIS departments can reach out to their alumni and provide workshops and seminars. Keeping up these contacts can provide feedback for continuous revitalization and improvement of LIS programs. Library and information schools can be catalysts in promoting information access and use by disadvantaged communities through their products, programs and activities.

Recommendation. IFLA should encourage library and information science schools to adopt a socially responsible orientation, including the promotion of a strong service ethic towards all population groups.

The Electronic Information Gap (Kagan)

The Dakar Declaration on the Internet and the African Media (1997) called for creating a culture of online communications and ensuring African content on the Internet. Kagan cites the Declaration as just one example that people and institutions everywhere want electronic access to information and are working towards their goals. As opposed to every country's elites, most of the world's people must contend with all the barriers associated with poverty. Regarding electronic access, Zulu noted the following barriers: lack of adequate electricity; lack of good computer environments (dust, humidity, and heat); poorly developed telecommunications infrastructures; few qualified people to maintain equipment; large illiterate or semi-literate populations, lack of foreign exchange, language barriers, lack of national information policies, and lack of ability to upgrade obsolete equipment. Let us be mildly optimistic that solar energy, microwave and satellite technologies may prove useful in addressing these enormous problems.

Herbert Schiller has described the phenomenal growth of corporate power in the rich countries including the deregulation of economic activities, privatization of functions once public, and commercialization of activities once social. To receive assistance, poor countries must contend with the World Bank's structural adjustment programs that mandate privatization, currency devaluation, removal of trade restrictions, cuts in subsidies, and severe reduction of services such as health and education. And such aid comes with Eurocentric cultural strings attached. Corporate media has the power to choose what ideas to present and regulate what people think and believe.

As opposed to a "public good," transnational corporations view electronic information as a commodity. Microsoft dominates personal computing and tries to control Internet content and commerce through the arrangement of selected icons on its desktop. Many have praised the Internet's diversity and profound democratic effect, but commercialization runs in a counter direction. There are also questions of language and local content. English is the dominant Internet language, and although most countries now have at least minimum presence of the web, the great majority of content is still provided from Europe and North America.

Furthermore, minorities within rich countries are also marginalized. For example, a recent study of United States students found that 73% of white students had their own computers as opposed to 32% of black students. Libraries have a social responsibility to try to equalize access to electronic information. We will need to become much more politically active within our professional associations and our societies to promote universal access to information.

Recommendations. IFLA should promote the development of local content electronic resources. IFLA should promote policies and develop programs that equalize access to the Internet.

North-South Library Cooperation (Abdullahi)

Ismail Abdullahi begins from the premise that national development necessitates the cooperation of all sectors of a national economy and the integration of economic, social and cultural advances. Development therefore requires increased access to information. The countries of the North have recognized this and use information extensively. The rapid growth of information technology is further increasing the already large gap between the information rich and poor. There is a lack of sufficient cooperation and resource sharing between North and South and a lack of development infrastructure in the South. The goals should be to remove all barriers of library resource sharing and provide equal access by any individual from any geographical location to the sum total of the world's knowledge.

We have recently seen a high degree of interest and activity in library development and cooperation in developing countries. But Salman has recognized the following problems: lack of essential infrastructures for national information systems, shortages of skilled people, underutilized information services, unsatisfactory access to locally produced information, access to a very limited quantity of foreign and international information literature, and lack of application of new technologies. Furthermore, government monopolies have often stifled the flow of information due to unwise telecommunications policies and lack of resources. Policymakers in Africa and elsewhere often do not perceive the importance of information for national development. Librarians must work to change these attitudes to information and technology transfer.

Recommendations. IFLA should promote greater resource sharing between the North and South, including Southern links to the information superhighway. IFLA should research the education and training needs of Southern countries in order to plan the development of appropriate information infrastructures. IFLA should urge appropriate government agencies to develop policies conducive to the development of information infrastructures.

The Profession, Library Associations, and IFLA Structure

The first open meeting of the Social Responsibilities Discussion Group was held on August 16, 1998 in Amsterdam. There were a number of comments addressing IFLA's structure and the need to mainstream the issues of social responsibility. One speaker asserted that IFLA's Regional Sections are marginalized within Division 8, and noted that there was a proposal coming for changing the structure. It was noted that the Regional Section on Latin America and the Caribbean was holding a panel on the information gap in Amsterdam. This speaker noted that there is probably more support than we know about within IFLA. Another participant noted that such issues are pervasive in librarianship, and that many of us are librarians precisely to address such concerns. Another speaker lamented that information gap issues are hardly talked about in one of the rich country associations, the American Library Association. There was consensus that the Discussion Group should try to mainstream social responsibility issues within IFLA.

Recommendations. IFLA should reevaluate its structure in order to better address information gap issues. IFLA should compile a report on how various library associations are addressing

these issues.

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